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## "Johan Huizinga on Spelling and Linguistics"

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## JOHAN HUIZINGA (1872-1945) ON SPELLING AND LINGUISTICS

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Not many of his admirers are aware of the fact that the great Dutch historian Johan Huizinga, whose works include *The Waning of the Middle Ages*, was originally a linguist. As a student, he did not feel attracted to history; he wanted to follow a career in oriental studies and comparative linguistics.

In 1891, Johan Huizinga enrolled as a student in Dutch language at the university of Groningen. A few years later, he went to Germany; he spent the winter semester 1895-1896 at Leipzig University. There it soon became clear to him that contemporary German linguistics as practised by the Junggrammatiker could not provide him with the answers to the questions that fascinated him, namely problems in the field of semantics. For his doctoral dissertation he chose a theme which called for an entirely different approach, as can be seen from the draft he wrote when back at Groningen. The 38 pages 'Introduction and Plan of a Study on Light and Sound' ('Opzet voor een Studie over Licht en Geluid') gives a good indication of his intention to demonstrate the meaning of the lyrical-associative factor in the development of language. However, having read Huizinga's draft his Groningen supervisor who himself had been trained at Leipzig, promptly rejected this plan: it was without any importance to linguistics. Thus, Huizinga was forced to switch to a different subject. In 1897, he received his Groningen doctorate with a dissertation on the jester in Sanskrit drama. The original problem, however, kept him under its spell.

In 1898, after finishing his doctoral dissertation, Huizinga submitted a paper to *Indogermanische Forschungen*; it was entitled 'Über die Vernachlässigung der Wortbedeutung in der vergleichenden Sprachwissenschaft'. In the accompanying letter to Karl Brugmann he wrote: "Hoffentlich wird der etwas revolutionäre Charakter meiner kleinen Schrift an sich kein Grund zur Abweisung sein". Brugmann, however, was not impressed by Huizinga's views, and he curtly replied: "Sie müssen erst noch mehr lernen, bevor Sie zu lehren anfangen". A second paper was also rejected by Brugman. After this clash with the Neogrammarians Huizinga turned definitively to Indian cultural history, and from that subject one can draw a straight line to his famous *The Waning of the Middle Ages*. Maybe we should be thankful to Karl Brugmann for this.

In 1893, Dr Roeland A. Kollewijn (1857-1942), a Leipzig trained teacher of Dutch and German, founded a 'Society for the Simplification of our Spelling', and it was this society that united those who were in favour of reforming the Dutch spelling system. It took some forty years to achieve the first official results, and, in the meantime, spelling reform had become a public affair. The Dutch spelling war reached its climax in the 1930's, and national celebrities such as professor Huizinga became inescapably involved. When in Holland the fierce battle for and against a 'Simplified Spelling' was going on, Huizinga took a stand against those who proposed to change the written language. As he saw it, spelling simplification would mean 'vulgarizing and levelling' the Dutch language. However, when an anti-Kollewijn society was founded in 1934, he refused to become its chairman. As president of the Royal Dutch Academy, he felt he had better refrain from becoming a member of the new society, in spite of the fact that

he was sympathetic to its goal. Be this as it may, Huizinga got involved in a public debate on spelling with the Dutch minister of Education, Mr Marchant. It was this very minister, who, in

1934, prescribed some – not all – proposals of the followers of Kollewijn for Dutch schools; in 1947 this new Dutch spelling was finally regulated by law.

Now, many linguistically trained opponents of spelling reform were of the opinion that the ‘Kollewijn’ movement was inspired by linguistic ideas from the late 19th century, mainly neogrammarian ones, and I think we should assume that Huizinga, too, had recognized the neogrammarian foundations of Dutch spelling reform. Thus, leaving aside all other issues, however important they may be, my claim is that for the second time in his life Huizinga found himself confronted with the consequences of the neogrammarian approach, and he did not like them any more than he had before. And for the second time, he lost his battle ‘gegen die Junggrammatiker’.

### Further reading

\* Jan Noordegraaf 1992. ‘Uit het verleden van een historicus. De taalkundige ambities van de jonge Huizinga’. *Voortgang, jaarboek voor de Neerlandistiek* 13, 197-215. (This paper includes Huizinga’s text ‘Über die Vernachlässigung der Wortbedeutung in der vergleichenden Sprachwissenschaft’).

[http://www.dbnl.org/tekst/\\_voo004199201\\_01/\\_voo004199201\\_01\\_0009.php](http://www.dbnl.org/tekst/_voo004199201_01/_voo004199201_01_0009.php)

Ukrainian translation by Serhij Wakulenko: ‘Із нйтьтєвохо шліаху огнохо історїка (мовознав...і зманхання Heuzinxы замолоду)’. *Zbirnyk Charkivskoho історїко-філолоґі...nobo tovarystva* (Nova serija, t. 12), Xarkiv 2006, 267-278. Xarkiv’skyj nacional’nyj pedahohičnyji universytet; Xarkivs’ke історїко-філолоґічне tovarystvo.

<http://hdl.handle.net/1871/10886>

\* Jan Noordegraaf 1994. ‘ ‘On Light and Sound’. Johan Huizinga and 19th-century linguistics’. ‘Wat oars as mei in echte taal’. *Fryske Stúdzjes ta gelegenheid fan it ôfskie fan prof.dr. A. Feitsma as beechlearaar Fryske Taal en Letterkunde*. Under redaksje fan Ph. Breuker, H.D. Meijering en J. Noordegraaf, 163-185. Ljouwert: Fryske Akademy.

<http://dare.ubvu.vu.nl/bitstream/handle/1871/9803>

\* J. Huizinga, *Opzet voor een Studie over Licht en Geluid*. Uitgegeven en ingeleid door Jan Noordegraaf en Esther Tros. Amsterdam: Stichting Neerlandistiek VU & Münster: Nodus Publikationen, 1996. (= Cahiers voor Taalkunde, 11). 100 pp.

<http://imagebase.ubvu.vu.nl/cdm/ref/collection/digi/id/4335>